

Suh-weet!

Enjoying chocolate's dark side

by MADELEINE GREY

Just when it seems there's nothing safe to eat anymore, deliciously good news arrives on the nutrition front. It's creamy and sweet, goes down like satin, delivers rich flavour and is loved by almost everyone — especially on February 14. Chocolate, believe it or not, is good for you.

Besides that addictive flavour, chocolate contains strikingly high amounts of plant compounds (a.k.a. phytochemicals) called flavonoids. Flavonoids act as antioxidants, which means they protect against disease by preventing cell damage. Flavonoids are also found in tea, red wine and such vegetables and fruits as prunes, blueberries and spinach — but chocolate has more.

In rating food antioxidants, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) discovered that dark chocolate has twice the antioxidants found in milk chocolate, four times the amount in raisins and about 10 times that in raspberries.

While Toronto author and dietitian Liz Pearson cautions that chocolate research is still preliminary, she's seen enough positive information to put chocolate on the title of two of her books — *The Ultimate Healthy Eating Plan (That Still Leaves Room for Chocolate)*, co-authored with Mairlyn Smith, and *When in Doubt, Eat Broccoli! (But Leave Some Room for Chocolate)*.

Pearson says flavonoid-rich chocolate is good for your heart. Research so far has shown that it “protects the heart by dilating arteries and making them more elastic. It also reduces the risk of plaque buildup on artery

walls and the risk of blood clots.”

But before you rush out to buy twice your usual Valentine's treats, Pearson adds two caveats to her cocoa-laden endorsement: The first is moderation; the second is that not all chocolate is equal.

Pearson recommends limiting grown-up chocolate enjoyment to just ½ oz (15 g) a day. Her allotted adult single portion is equivalent to 2 or 3 squares of a chocolate bar, 50 mini M&M's chocolate candies or a supermarket-bakery 2-bite brownie. And sorry, kids: Pearson does not recommend serving chocolate to children *every day* nor does she provide a kids' daily portion size for chocolate, saying that would be a bad habit to get into. And even grown-ups should remember that chocolate's good-for-you flavonoids come at a price: That ½ oz also rings in about 100 cal and 5 g fat.

Regrettably, chocolate is a concentrated source of fat, sugar and calories and while it can fit into a healthy diet, it can only do so snugly. That's why some health experts are reticent about recommending it. Bonnie Liebman of *Nutrition Action Healthletter* dismisses chocolate as a health food, writing, “We need chocolate like we need portable pats of butter to swallow between meals.”

Pearson acknowledges that chocolate shouldn't be a large part of anyone's diet or take the place of healthy, disease-fighting foods like vegetables and fruits, but she encourages “fun food in moderation.” And when it comes to kids, she sees the value of



using chocolate “to make other foods more fun.”

So she adds dark chocolate chips to high-fibre muffins, low-fat quick breads, whole wheat pancakes and homemade trail mix for her daughters, Chelsea, 11, and Shannon, six.

The darker the chocolate, the better. While not everyone likes the bitter flavours of the dark stuff, these sharp, pungently astringent sensations on your tongue come from those flavonoids. Dark chocolate, which includes bitter, bittersweet and semi-sweet chocolate, contains 35 to 88% cocoa solids. Milk chocolate has just 10% cocoa solids, and white chocolate has none at all.

Cocoa powder, meanwhile, is a concentrated source of cocoa solids. It is made by pressing some of the butter out of roasted cocoa beans. Most supermarket cocoa powders are low-fat, with less than 10% cocoa butter.

While it is helpful to read labels and choose dark chocolate with the highest percentage of cocoa solids to get the most flavonoids, you still can't be

certain how much you are getting. That's because flavonoids are often destroyed during chocolate processing and manufacturing.

Mars Incorporated, maker of M&M's and Mars bars, claims its processing method retains natural flavonoid levels — just look for its “Cocoapro” logo on the packaging. Even though some of these products are made with milk chocolate versus dark, they still contain flavonoids — you just won't know how much. According to Pearson, we may see a day when all companies will list measured flavonoids on packaging.

Even without flavonoid levels on them, labels are still an important place to do your chocolate snooping:

- Search out dark varieties with the highest amount of cocoa solids — quality chocolate manufacturers use from 55 to 70%, but some may even go higher.
- Avoid products with fats other than cocoa butter, such as cholesterol-raising hydrogenated vegetable oils, tropical oils or butter fat.
- Take a pass on any “chocolate flavoured” products and enjoy small amounts of fine dark chocolates that contain only cocoa solids, cocoa butter, sugar, vanilla and lecithin.

If you're worried about caffeine, bear in mind that a cup of decaf has almost the same amount of the stuff as a glass of chocolate milk, a cup of hot cocoa or a milk chocolate bar. Par for the course, dark chocolate contains more. A 1½ oz (40 g) bar of dark chocolate has slightly less caffeine than a can of cola or a small cup of coffee.

Sure it's got a little caffeine and is loaded with fat and sugar. But when it comes to indulging in flavonoid-rich chocolate, that seems like a small price to pay. ♥

Double Chocolate Biscotti

A classic biscotti has no butter or oil and is a crunchy mouthful, perfect with a glass of cold milk or a warm cup of coffee. These cookies feature mini dark chocolate chips and for decadence's sake (and to top up the flavonoids) are dipped in dark chocolate too. But make sure you use soft flour — look for it in the bulk section of your supermarket — and not just regular all-purpose!

¾ cup (175 mL)	whole unblanched almonds
1 cup (250 mL)	sugar
2 cups (500 mL)	soft whole wheat flour
1 cup (250 mL)	all-purpose flour
1 tbsp (15 mL)	all-purpose flour
¼ cup (50 mL)	mini dark chocolate chips
2 tsp (30 mL)	baking powder
1 tsp (15 mL)	cinnamon
¼ tsp (1 mL)	salt
2	omega-3 eggs
2	omega-3 egg whites
1 tbsp (15 mL)	orange zest
2 tsp (10 mL)	vanilla
4 1 oz/28 g	squares semi-sweet chocolate



Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C).

Arrange almonds on a baking sheet and bake at 350°F (180°C) for 10 minutes, flipping them halfway. Allow to cool. In a food processor, add sugar, then with blade running pour ½ cup toasted almonds through the feeding tube and grind into a fine powder. Coarsely chop remaining ¼ cup almonds.

In a large bowl, whisk together ground almonds and sugar, chopped almonds, the soft whole wheat flour, 1 cup of the all-purpose flour, chocolate chips, baking powder, cinnamon and salt.

In a medium bowl, whisk together eggs and egg whites, orange zest and vanilla.

Pour egg mixture into flour mixture and combine. Knead the dough right in the bowl for 1 to 2 minutes. Cut the dough into 4 equal pieces.

Dust countertop with remaining 1 tbsp (15 mL) all-purpose flour and roll a piece of dough into a 9 by 1½ in. (23 by 4 cm) log. Repeat 3 times.

On a parchment-paper-lined baking sheet, arrange logs and bake at 350°F (180°C) for 25 minutes or until golden. To test, lightly press down on dough with your finger. It should not leave an indentation.

Cool on a rack for at least an hour. Slice each log into ½ in. (1 cm) slices. Place each slice, cut side down, on baking sheet. Bake in 300°F (150°C) oven for 20 minutes or until dry and light golden.

In a medium, microwave-safe bowl, melt chocolate at medium in microwave oven until softened, about 3 to 4 minutes. Using a spoon or fork, drizzle chocolate over each biscotti. Arrange on a rack and allow to set and dry for another 24 hours.

Makes 5 to 6 dozen biscotti.

Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests our Nutrition column using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing slight variations in the result.

Today's Parent

Beginning February 1, food writer Madeleine Greey will host a special one-day forum on the first Tuesday of each month to provide helpful hints about feeding your kids.